DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 261 273 CG 018 462

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TITLE Joint and Maternal Custody: The Outcome for Boys Aged 6-11 and Their Parents.
PUB DATE 24 Apr 85
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Orthopsychiatric Association (New York, NY, April 20-24, 1985)
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adjustment (to Environment); Behavior Problems; *Child Custody; *Children; *Child Welfare; *Divorce; Fatherless Family; *Males; Parent Child Relationship; Self Esteem; Student Adjustment
IDENTIFIERS *Joint Custody; *Maternal Custody

ABSTRACT

Although divorcing parents have a variety of child custody arrangements from which to choose, opinions are mixed as to which children benefit from which arrangements. To compare the adjustment of boys in joint and maternal physical custody and to investigate factors related to their adjustment, 20 joint custody families with a boy aged 6-11 and a matched group of 20 maternal custody families in which the boy had regular visitations with the father were interviewed. Individual interviews with the boy, both parents when possible, and a written report from a subset of teachers were obtained. Parents reported boys in joint custody to have significantly fewer behavioral difficulties, teachers indicated that joint custody children were better adjusted in the classroom, and informal clinical impressions suggested that joint custody boys had higher self-esteem and less anxiety than maternal custody boys. While the adjustment of maternal custody boys was highly correlated with the length of time elapsed since separation, there was no correlation between time elapsed and the adjustment of joint custody children. This finding suggests that divorce may be less of a crisis for boys in joint custody. Data from follow-up questionnaires sent to all parents 2 years after the original study suggest that fathers who chose joint custody had higher self-esteem and were more respected by their ex-wives during their marriages. (NRB)

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Joint and Maternal Custody:

The Outcome for Boys Aged 6-11 and their Parents

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This study was designed to compare the adjustment of children in joint and maternal physical custody and to investigate factors related to the adjustment of children in the two groups. To allow for a careful examination of the effects of various factors on children's adjustment, a homogenous sample of children was sought. Latency-age boys were selected as the target population because previous research has raised questions about the optimal custody arrangements for this group. While a number of researchers, most notably Judith Wallerstein and Joan Kelly, have found that boys experience more difficulties than girls in the mother-headed home following divorce, suggesting that they might benefit from a shared physical custody arrangement, the pioneering study of Susan Steinman raised questions about whether younger latency age boys might be a group that had particular difficulty coping with the demands of joint custody.

Twenty joint custody families with a boy aged 6-11 and a

Paper presented at the 62nd Annual Meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, April 24, 1985, New York City

matched control group of 20 maternal custody families in which the boy had regular visitation with father were recruited by advertisements and paid for participation. All joint custody boys spent on average at least two days/week with each parent; 75% of the families split the childcare 50-50. In the maternal custody group, over half of the boys visited with father at least once a week. All but one family in each custody group had decided on the custody arrangements by mutual agreement. Families in both groups had been separated for 1-6 years and were of middle to upper middle class background. Individual interviews with the child, the father as well as mother when possible, and a written report from the teacher (obtained for a subset of the children) provided the basis for the child assessment.

The most global measure of child functioning was a standardized behavior problem inventory completed by the parents (Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist), and on this inventory boys in joint custody were reported to have significantly fewer behavioral difficulties than maternal custody children. Teacher reports of classroom functioning (Classroom Adjustment Rating Scale) suggested that joint custody children were better adjusted in the classroom as well. Informal clinical impressions of the children from the individual interviews also suggested that joint custody boys had higher self esteem and were less anxious.

Several methods were used to assess children's sense of

security and their attachment to parents. First, parents were questioned carefully as to manifestations of confusion and anxiety shown by the boys in connection with moves between homes or visits with father (depending on whether that family had joint or maternal custody) as well as anxiety associated with the organization of their daily lives. For example, parents were asked how confused, upset, or anxious their child appeared about when he was supposed to visit the other parent or about what he should bring when going to the other home; parents also were asked how much confusion or anxiety the child showed about what he was supposed to be doing for homework or about what he should bring to school. There was no significant difference between the two custody groups on this parent report measure; in fact, it is interesting to note that there was actually a trend for parents of maternal custody boys to report their sons showed more anxiety about the organization of their school work and personal possessions.

The variety and intensity of boys' feelings toward their parents were assessed through the Family Relations Test (Bene and Anthony), a game-like task administered directly to children. On this test, joint custody boys appeared strongly attached to both parents as well as comfortable in expressing both positive and negative feelings toward parents. Maternal custody boys, in contrast, appeared reluctant to acknowledge having negative feelings toward their mothers.

To elaborate on this finding: The Family Relations Test has a number of categories of feelings about family members, and in the category describing mild negative feelings toward family members there are ten statements such as "This person in the family is sometimes not very patient"; "This person in the family is sometimes a bit too fussy". Almost half of the boys in maternal custody did not assign a single such card to mother, and over three-quarters of the boys did not give mother more than one. Given the fact that the relationship between the custodial mother and son during the first few years following the marital separation has frequently been observed to be a troubled one, this finding was quite unexpected. A possible explanation for this finding is that boys in maternal custody suppressed negative feelings toward mother out of fear that acknowledgement of even mild feelings of annoyance might drive away their only caretaker.

When parents were questioned about their perception of the severity of loyalty conflicts in their children, joint custody parents reported that their sons experienced more intense loyalty concerns. Most maternal custody parents dismissed loyalty issues as a major concern of their children. However, when children were directly administered an original test which assessed loyalty conflicts in hypothetical situations, for example:

> "Imagine that you're supposed to spend the day with your mom, and your dad calls up and says he won free tickets to a baseball game for that day. What would you do? Why? How much would you worry that you did the right thing? How badly do you think (the parent

not chosen) would feel?"

On this test, children in the two groups evidenced loyalty concerns which were remarkably similar in kind and intensity. Many children in both custody groups appeared to have significant loyalty concerns.

Clinical impressions of the children based on a child interview and family drawing test indicated that joint custody children were no more likely to harbor fantasies of parental reconciliation than were children in maternal custody. In fact, on the family drawing test there was a trend for more boys in maternal custody to draw an intact family configuration - i.e., to depict all family members as engaged in an activity together or as living in one house. A prominent finding from the clinical assessment was that many maternal custody boys experienced an intense desire for more contact with father. In contrast, most joint custody children appeared relatively content with the amount of contact they had with each parent.

Looking at the influence of various factors on children's overall adjustment (as assessed by the parent report of problem behaviors) in the two custody groups, I found that while the adjustment of the maternal custody boys was highly correlated with the length of time elapsed since separation, there was no correlation between time elapsed and the adjustment of joint custody children. That is, joint custody children whose parents had been separated one year were as well adjusted on average as

those whose parents had been separated five or six years. This finding suggested that divorce may be less of a crisis for boys in joint custody. Clinical impressions were consistent with this hypothesis: while most maternal custody boys whose parents had separated relatively recently (one or two years prior to the interview) were highly anxious when discussing the divorce and their relationship with father, joint custody boys of recently separated parents appeared much more comfortable when discussing the divorce and current family relationships.

A reasonable hypothesis is that differences in the types of parents who chose joint and maternal custody might explain the differences found in the children. Despite an effort to match parents on SES variables, the joint custody sample had somewhat higher income and more education compared to the parents with maternal custody. The typical joint custody parent had earned a master's degree; the typical parent with maternal custody had a bachelor's degree. However, the SES variables explained only a small part of the differences in child adjustment.

Surprisingly, there was no difference in the level of conflict between joint and maternal custody parents at the time of the divorce according to parents' retrospective accounts. Feelings ranged from amicable to very bitter in the two groups. At the time of the interview, mothers with joint custody reported feeling as much anger toward their ex-spouse as did mothers with full custody and reported arguing with their ex-husbands as

frequently. However, joint custody mothers were significantly more likely to say that they felt their ex-husbands were supportive and understanding of their needs as a parent.

The difference between custody groups in amount of support mother experienced in the co-parental relationship explained only a small part of the differences in children's overall adjustment. In fact, within the joint custody group there was no relationship between level of parental conflict on any of the various conflict measures and child adjustment. That is, joint custody children whose parents had a relatively hostile relationship were no more disturbed on average than children whose parents were on relatively amicable terms. The extent of conflict between parents did influence the ease with which children in joint custody settled into one home after returning from the other parent's house. When parental conflict levels were high, children needed more time to readjust.

On average, parents with joint and maternal custody did not differ in the extent to which they agreed about child-rearing practices. However, mothers with joint custody did report having greater respect for the parenting abilities of their ex-husbands compared with mothers with sole custody.

The structure of the joint custody schedule had little effect on the adjustment of the children in shared custody. There was no relationship between frequency of home changes and child adjustment. Children who changed homes daily were as well

adjusted on average as those who changed homes once a week.

One factor which did appear to differentiate the groups and which was correlated with child adjustment was the self-concept of the fathers. There was a trend (approaching significance) for fathers of joint custody boys to have higher self-esteem on the Tennessee Self Concept Scale compared to maternal custody fathers or to either group of mothers, and sons' adjustment was significantly and positively correlated with their fathers' self-esteem.

What conclusions can be drawn from this study? First, there was no evidence that joint custody is in any way inherently problematic for latency age boys. Quite the contrary: joint custody appears to have the potential to provide a quite healthy caretaking arrangement for boys. This study uncovered few specific factors which systematically predicted the adjustment of children in the joint custody group. From a practical standpoint, this study suggests that parents need not be on particularly amicable terms or to be in unusually close agreement about child-rearing approaches for joint custody to benefit children. It is important to note, however, that in only one family were the joint custody arrangements court-imposed, and these conclusions may well not extend to families where one or both parents are strongly opposed to the shared custody arrangements.

Does this study indicate that joint custody is a healthier

arrangement for latency age boys? While I believe that the joint custody arrangements per se did contribute to the good adjustment of the children, it must be recognized that the better behavioral adjustment of the joint custody boys need not be entirely attributable to children's post-divorce experiences. Though differences between the parents in the two custody groups were less great than anticipated, some differences were found - e.g., higher self-esteem in joint custody fathers and greater respect for their ex-husbands' parenting capabilities on the part of joint custody mothers. On theoretical grounds, the differences found between parents could reflect either the cause or the effect of joint custody; parents who choose joint rather than maternal custody may have different personality characteristics from the outset, or joint custody may enhance parents' own adjustment.

In a follow-up questionnaire sent to all parents 2 years after the original study, I sought to find out whether these differences between joint and maternal custody parents reflect the cause or the effect of the two custody arrangements. On this questionnaire, joint custody fathers were no more likely to say that their post-divorce experiences had enhanced their self-esteem than were mothers with either full or joint custody, and joint custody mothers were no more likely to say that their respect for their ex-husbands had increased since the separation than were mothers with full custody. It is possible that parents were unaware of the impact of their post-divorce experiences on

their attitudes and feelings; a better way of examining this issue would be to conduct a longitudinal study looking at changes in parents over time. However, based on the results of my follow-up study, it seems most reasonable to conclude that fathers that chose joint custody had had higher self esteem and had been more respected by their ex-wives during the marriage.

Clearly, this study cannot give definite answers as to why children in joint custody were better adjusted. It is possible that fathers who chose joint custody may have provided more competent parenting to their young sons from their earliest days, or that parents who later chose joint custody had had a more supportive coparental relationship during the marriage, with the result that the boys came to the divorce with strengths which made them more resilient to the stresses of the divorce. However, joint custody also appeared to contribute to children's good adjustment; children in joint custody appeared less pained by the overwhelming sense of loss which troubled children living solely with mother. The results of this study suggest that research on the adjustment of children of parents who mutually agree to share custody must move from looking for vulnerabilities in these children to investigating why children often prosper in joint custody.